

THE THREE ELMS

By HENRY NORMANBY.

In the following powerful little story the writer has struck a vein that has been, so far, at least in English literature, very little exploited—the universal brotherhood and interdependence of all created things. His three elms are not merely inanimate wood, but participate in the joys and sorrows of humanity.



THEY were of equal age and beauty, the three elms, and the memory of man failed and became extinct before it reached back through the years to the hour of their nativity. They were gracious to the sight, and their leaves made slumbrous music in the soft night breeze. A great brotherhood of soul was theirs, a sublime patience, an unfailing charity to every living thing. They stretched their arms hospitably, and the birds of the air came into them and made them their home. They lifted their heads in the sunlight and whispered their secrets beneath the moon. The compassionate rain brought them their peace and the harsh winds of winter moved them not to anger. In the days of their youth young children climbed about them and made merry in their branches, and in the fullness of time grew up to manhood and went their ways, forgetting them. But the three elms went not away, but remained and remembered.

Together they grew in their stateliness and strength, and toil was not theirs, neither sorrow, nor suffering. War and strife passed by them unheeding, leaving them to their august repose. Theirs was an added glory to the landscape, a culminating beauty to the wide stretch of verdurous earth. In the deep shade bestowed by them tired cattle found coolness and rest, and young lambs nestled therein, and the wayfarer unburdened himself and slept. Beneath them, in the rich autumnal noon-days, aged children of the earth sat in contentment, becoming drowsily reminiscent, telling of the days of their adolescence, far back in the hazy region of the past.

Removed from all discord of commerce, they towered high and broadened nobly, and the green of their leaves was unsullied by the mire of cities and the noxious exhalations of factories. In the long June nights the benediction of their arms was given freely to the lovers who plighted troth in their spacious midst, and at eventide, in the great silence of winter, having cast off their garment of leaves, they slumbered, sleeping the dreamless sleep.

It was theirs, each one of them, to have an austere destiny, to take

great part in the triumphant march of the world, to determine the tragedies of the lives of men, to be the agents of love and sorrow, of despair and death. They knew it not, the three elms, as they grew together in the sunlight, stretching out their long arms, touching and caressing each other.

The slow years passed away, beckoning to the children of the earth who unwillingly followed them, and the three elms grew old. Many generations of men had lived and died, and the hand of Change lay disquietingly upon the land. A railway had marred their peace and broken their solitude and the horrible din of machinery drowned the sibilant lisp of their voices. These innovations weighed upon them with exceeding heaviness, and their brows became furrowed and wrinkled, and their limbs bent and distorted, and the bright green of their leaves dull and discoloured, their hands trembled as those stricken of the palsy, and they nodded feebly and without meaning.

Yet high above the discordant railway and the reverberating workshops they towered magnificently. Still they stretched out their majestic arms, and still they gave an added glory to the landscape, a culminating beauty to the verdurous earth.

At length, in the full blaze of high summer, men approached the trees and stood in their serene shade. They spoke together long and earnestly, as those who do business in merchandise, and measured them with tapes and rods. With coarse speech and rude jest they laid sacrilegious hands on the fathers of the forest, and the three elms knew that their hour had come. Sublime in their stately grace and dignity they asked no mercy, no consideration. It was sufficient that it had to be. Presently the men returned with axes with which they struck at the trees, foully and insolently. The other trees looked on in dull amazement. Blow after blow the men struck, paused to rest awhile, then smote again and again. For a space the Patriarchs gave no sign, then the wind blew upon them and they groaned, for the wind, which hitherto had assailed them in vain, now had power upon them and wrought with it grievously to their undoing. Still the men went on striking and cutting into them, deeply and cruelly, and the wind, gathering in resolution, pressed heavily and bowed their majestic heads. They swayed awhile, leaned widely, then, with a stupendous uproar of tearing wood, fell lifeless upon the earth. Side by side they lay in their calamity, even as they had stood together in their strength and beauty.

Nevertheless, it was supremely theirs to have an austere destiny, to march magnificently through the centuries, to symbolise the tragedies of the lives of men, to be the august agents and accomplices of love and sorrow, of hope and despair, of desolation and death.

Their broad, beneficent arms no longer stretched widely; their bright green leaves no longer whispered sweet secrets beneath the moon; their majestic crests no longer towered above the world. Shorn of their strength, mutilated, disfigured, and humiliated, they lay silent and sorrowful upon the moist green earth.

Presently they were borne away in carts to the railway, chained

ignominiously to vile trucks, and dragged swiftly through the peaceful country to a great and turbulent city. Here they were separated. It was the last of their associated misfortunes. Through all the changes of the fateful years they had grown up together. Every joy and every sorrow, every triumph and every vicissitude, had been equally shared by them. The same benign showers had fallen upon them; the same soft winds had caressed them; the same flowers had breathed over them; the same fair children had gambolled beneath their branches; the same dews had cooled them; the same birds had slept in the shelter of their leaves. Now, in their death, they were divided; the Fates had spoken and the austere destiny of each was about to be fulfilled.

The first was taken to a large prison, and of it was builded a gibbet, whereon doomed men, haggard-eyed, were strangled. It was cast about with horror and darkness and desolation. Men passed it shudderingly, with averted eyes; women wept at the thought of it; children were not allowed to look upon it; the very hangman hurried away from its appalling presence. The lost men who were taken to it saw in its face the abandonment of hope. The light of the sun never more fell upon it; no longer did it hearken to the sound of laughter and song; not once again did the pure air of heaven whisper its benison over its head. It stood silent, in terrible solitude, shunned, feared, and abhorred, wet with the bitter tears of hopeless men.

Yet, since it stood as the dread symbol of human justice, since by its means was carried out the due punishment of sin, and since it alone heard the last whisper of dying men, its destiny was austere.

The second was purchased by a shipwright, and of it was fashioned a fishing-boat. It was dedicated to the high office of Toil, and by night and by day, in summer and winter, sunshine and rain, wind and bitter sleet, it sailed the sea, spoiling it of its treasure of food, doing battle with it valiantly for ever. It was the home of lonely men, going with them where-soever they went, protecting them from the violence of the tempest and the unreasoned raging of the sea. It carried for them that which they perilously wrested from the clutch of the waters, and they put their trust in it, placing their lives in its keeping, loving it. In no wise did it betray their sublime faith, for, when at length, after long years of patient labour, borne always without anger and without complaint, the might of the sea was greater than it could withstand, and the wild rush of the wind swifter than it could out-flee—when, on a tempestuous night, its strength failed and the sea conquered, it perished with them. Together they went down into the uttermost deeps of the sea, lying cold and forgotten in the hiding-place of the great waters.

Yet, since it performed its task nobly and without hope of reward, since women blessed it and men trusted to it not in vain, and since, at the end, it perished without fear and undeserving of reproach, its destiny was austere.

The third and last elm was hurried away at night to the most squalid part of a squalid town, where dwelt an old man—ragged, mole-like, cadaverous. He worked long and arduously, and often into the deep

watches of the night, for the merchandise wherein he had dealings was in constant and hurried demand. His work-place was a cellar, damp and dreary, and ill-lit by a dingy oil-lamp. He had a wife and children, and he buried the dead to support the living. Day after day, and month after month, and year after year he toiled, this old man, making coffins of elm, wherein were hidden the dead, that men might behold them no more. His customers were the poor and broken in spirit, and his cellar was wet with the tears of the afflicted. With a rare foresight he made his own coffin, that his widow might be spared the expense of purchasing it. To him came the tree, fresh from the fragrance and living sweetness of the sunlit fields. He cut it up into short pieces, and of them fashioned his wares. It made many of them, and many was not enough. And so, bit by bit, it was taken away and returned to the earth whence it came; and the last coffin that was carried out of that dreadful cellar took with it him who had fashioned it.

Yet, since it alone assuaged the suffering of their pain, lifted the burden from the heavy-laden, and brought the weary into their appointed rest; since its place was the place of mourning and lamentation, its speech the low cry of the afflicted, and its silence the unbroken stillness of the grave; since for ever with it marched surely Death, its destiny was austere indeed.



THE UNKINDEST CUT OF ALL!

I think, of all the scores
Of unmitigated bores
That drag across your track
Night and morning—
From the man who's full of ills,
With his tonics and his pills,
To the man who thumps your back
Without warning,—
If there's any special first
For the epithet of worst,
I'm prepared at any hour
To apply it
To the man who, with a grin,
Says your hair is getting thin,
When it's quite beyond your power
To deny it!